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CINDY YAMANAKA, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

**Diane Musselmann is framed by images of a memorial site dedicated to disabled veterans and a photo of her dead husband at their home.**

THE MORNING READ

## The last steps

Woman carries on her husband's labors for a memorial for disabled veterans.

By **JAIMEE LYNN FLETCHER**  
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

**LOS ALAMITOS** • It will be the first of its kind.

There, among the National Mall memorials for fallen veterans from World War II and Vietnam and Korean wars, a new tribute is slated to be raised, this one honoring

American soldiers wounded in combat. It's a group that many say is often forgotten.

The Disabled Veterans Memorial is expected to open in 2011 in Washington, D.C. It'll complete a journey that's included 15 years of planning and \$85 million in fundraising.

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# VETERANS

FROM PAGE 1

Diane Musselmann knows the project well. And, although the Los Alamitos resident didn't start the effort, it's one she's committed to seeing through.

It's how she'll see her husband again.

## SOUL MATES

Diane remembers her first boyfriend, Kenny. He was an innocent schoolyard crush, the sandy-haired boy with the boisterous sense of humor courting the vibrant brunette with a ponytail wrapped in a colorful scarf.

They lunched together. They walked home from school together. They danced. It was as much of a relationship as two 11-year-olds could have.

Then, peer pressure kicked in. Diane wanted to be a cheerleader. Kenny wanted to play in the marching band. About the time they hit high school, they broke up.

But Kenny was persistent.

"His senior year, he figured out he wasn't going to get a date," Diane said, laughing. "So he went and played varsity football."

Kenny's plan worked. The couple reunited. And, after they'd each finished a year at Long Beach State, they married. They toasted with 7UP. They were 19.

The couple lived in Whittier. Diane took an accounting job and Kenny entered the Los Angeles Police Academy.

Then, their plans changed. Kenny was drafted and sent to Vietnam.

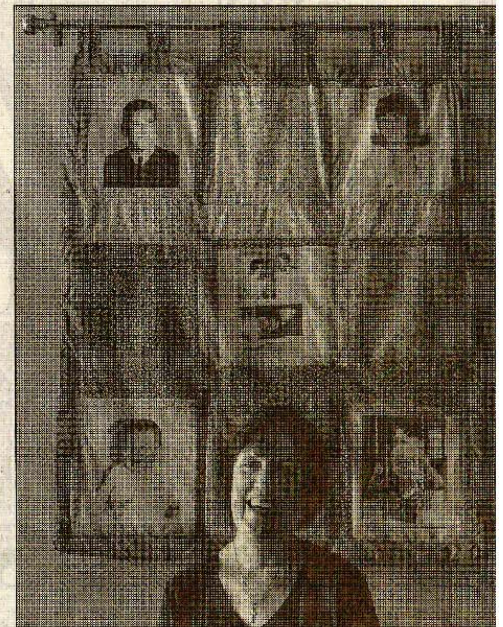
He served six months as an Army sniper. With one mission left before the end of his tour, he wrote Diane, asking her to meet him in Hawaii. It would be a romantic rendezvous.

"I was so excited," Diane said. "We hadn't seen each other in six months."



PHOTOS: CINDY YAMANAKA, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Diane Musselmann holds a photo of her late husband, Kenny, who lost both legs in Vietnam and became an advocate for wounded veterans.



Diane Musselmann is taking her husband's spot as a director of the Veterans' LIFE Memorial Foundation.

## STILL KENNY

Diane remembers the way Kenny told it:

He's surveying a dense jungle, a place riddled with Viet Cong. As usual, he's walking point. Then he spots a punji pit, a large hole filled with upright, sharpened bamboo spears, and calls a comrade over to talk strategy.

Then, Kenny recognizes a new threat. Both men freeze. They're standing on a land mine.

Kenny lifts his foot.

The explosion catapults him to the jungle floor, piercing his torn body with shrapnel. In the firefight that follows, he's shot several times.

A month later, in February 1969, Diane reached Kenny by phone.

She remembers her first question to her wounded husband.

"Are we still going to be able to have kids?"

"Well, I don't know about you, but I can."

She felt relief.

Her husband had lost both legs, and he'd been shot several times. But, in that ravaged body, Kenny

was still Kenny.

## BUILDING A LIFE

Kenny finished school and took an analyst job at the Seal Beach Naval Weapons Station. Diane took care of their two children.

The Musselmanns took annual family vacations, including trips for snow skiing and camping.

"We did everything other families did," Diane said. "Maybe we didn't do it like everybody else, but we did it the best we could."

Then, another curve. In 1986, at age 40, Kenny was diagnosed with cancer. It was a tumor consistent with the effects of Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant used by the American military in the jungles of Vietnam. As the cancer advanced, the use of prosthetic legs became too painful. So Kenny took to getting around by wheelchair.

Eight years later, he changed his mind.

Kenny strapped on some new artificial legs at home before going to church. Then, after entering the church in a wheelchair, he stood and got his bearings, ignoring the searing pain in

his hips.

As Kenny walked his daughter down the aisle, as steadily as he possibly could, row after row of the congregation started to cry.

Kenny just smiled.

"He told our daughter, Kenna, he would walk her down the aisle one day," Diane said. "He was a man of his word."

He spent the last 14 years of his life in a wheelchair. Then a cancer showed up in his liver and began to spread through his body. Two months ago, with his family by his side, Kenny died.

## BUILDING A MEMORIAL

Throughout his adult life, Kenny was an outspoken advocate for injured veterans. In 1989, he took a job as executive director of California Disabled American Veterans and, in 1998, he was offered a seat on the board of directors for Veterans' LIFE Memorial Foundation.

With Kenny gone, Diane is filling that spot, working to finish Kenny's dream.

"When this came along Kenny thought, 'This is it; this is what I need to pour

my heart and soul into," Diane said. "It is my honor to help (complete what he started)."

The memorial will honor veterans of past conflicts including those wounded in current battle zones.

Marble and glass wall representing strength and vulnerability, will bear the names of soldiers. A star-shaped reflecting pool and single eternal flame will represent the five branches of the armed forces.

"The young men who have been killed or missing are on everybody's mind and rightfully so," Diane said. "But there are more than 3 million living disabled veterans that people don't (recognize)."

For Diane, the memorial holds a special significance. She remembers the Vietnam veterans, many whom returned wounded and broken, to a count that often didn't seem care.

One of them was Kenny.

## About the foundation

Here's a look at the Disabled Veterans' LIFE Memorial Foundation's funding and spending for 2007.

**Total revenue:** \$23.3 million

**Money used for fundraising:** \$10.8 million

**Administrative expenses:** About \$259,000

**Executive pay:** Chief operating officer Frederic Fenstermacher - \$120,000

Source: Charity Navigator

She laid out bathing suits and homemade sundresses embroidered with her favorite flowers, daisies. She called her mother-in-law, asking to borrow a suitcase.

That's when she learned Kenny's family had received a telegram. Diane hung up and drove to her in-laws'. And as she read the brief, frustratingly vague message, Diane realized that not only would her plans for Hawaii change, so would her plans for life.

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